

**PART TWO** *In this feature...* ➤ Teach your horse to respect your space ➤ Keep his attention on you ➤ Help him learn to lead politely

# Space invader

*Does your horse walk all over you? Get him to take a step back and pay attention with advice from Warwick Schiller*

If a person, even somebody you know fairly well, moves into your personal space without invitation, how does it make you feel? Probably a bit awkward and uncomfortable. So why is it any different when your horse does it? Horses encroach on our personal space all the time, so much so that we often don't even notice them doing it. This is down to the way we handle them, but what may seem like your horse being affectionate could be undermining any training that you do.

Having a horse who respects your space and pays attention is the basis of all groundwork. It'll encourage him to be more responsive, and can even help with spooky behaviour. ➤



## Buffer zone

Each of us has a bubble of personal space around us, and it's the same for your horse – research has shown that horses in the wild have a personal space of around one metre. In the same way that we'll move out of the way to avoid bumping into other people, horses have lines of personal space that they follow. If one horse wants to enter the personal space of another, he'll ask with either submission or aggression based on his position within the herd. The problem is that we blur these rules by wanting to be close to our horses all the time.

Handling horses correctly is a bit like dating. Most people try to go straight to the cuddly, intimate stage of the relationship with their horses, but that isn't how horses naturally behave. They're more like people on a first date, wanting their own space, and it's only after they get to know and trust you that they feel comfortable letting you any closer. It doesn't happen immediately. Getting too close to your horse too soon shows a lack of respect, and if you don't respect him then he won't respect you.



## Our expert



Originally from Australia, but now based in California, **Warwick Schiller** is a former World Equestrian Games Australian team member. He makes online videos and holds clinics around the world, demonstrating the principles of horse training for any discipline.

## Baby steps

Horses learn about personal space as part of growing up. A foal in the field will usually stand close to his mother. He doesn't need to pay attention to what's going on around him because she'll do it for him, which means that although he's standing next to her, he's mentally in a different place. Leaning on her is his safe place, and that's where he'll rush back to if something scares him.

Later, when the foal is weaned and turned out with other horses, if he goes crashing into them they'll bite and squeal and he'll stop doing it. He also has to learn to pay attention to what the other horses are doing so he doesn't miss out on important social cues within the herd. The other horses don't tolerate leaning on each other, but as humans we tend to prolong and promote this juvenile behaviour in the way we handle our horses. It's part of our relationship with our horses that they can enter our space without us reacting, meaning we're condoning that behaviour, and it echoes the mare and foal relationship.

Most domestic horses have become paedomorphic, which means they display juvenile behaviours as adults. Dogs and human are the only mammals that should do this naturally in a group situation – when an adult horse reaches sexual maturity, he shouldn't display childlike tendencies anymore. However, in a domesticated environment our horses are allowed to continue to do to us what they did to their mothers. As a result, your horse will tend to be more spooky because he'll still be physically in one place but mentally in another, and feels he can crash into you if he's scared. You're his place of safety, but the problem is that he's so much bigger than you that you risk getting knocked over and hurt when he does it. So, you need to instead teach him to take a step back, pay attention and behave in a more adult-like way.

## The sweet spot

When teaching your horse to respect your space, you're trying to find the sweet spot. This is the safe place outside your personal space where he's completely comfortable and knows that you won't ask anything of him when he's standing there. Although he's allowed to relax there, his focus should be on you, waiting for whatever you ask next rather than switching off. He should stand there quietly on a loose leadrope and not move away or step into your space. You're allowed to move into his space because you're the boss, but he's not allowed to step into yours unless he's invited to do so.

### TOP TIP

Unless you're asking your horse to do something, your leadrope should always be slack. It's an aid, in the same way that your leg is an aid when you're riding, and if you keep putting pressure on it unnecessarily he'll become numb to it.

## How to do it...

Decide how big you want your bubble of personal space to be – I'd suggest about an arm's length. Ask your horse to step back away from you so he's outside this designated bubble. Do this first by using your halter aid and, if he doesn't respond, back it up by flicking the end of your leadrope or a flag towards him, without actually making contact. Once he's in the sweet spot, relax your aid and keep the leadrope loose because he could take any pressure on it as a cue to move forwards. If he then chooses to step

towards you, into your space, you need to send him back to the sweet spot in the same way.

In a herd, horses establish hierarchy by making each other move – if a dominant horse steps into the space of another herd member, the lower-ranking horse will step away. So, by asking your horse to step out of your space, you're showing him that you're the dominant one in your herd of two. In addition, horses instinctively want to conserve energy, so once he learns that he doesn't have to work if he stands quietly in his spot, he should be happy to stay there.



*We blur the rules of personal space by wanting to be close to our horses all the time*



## Negative reinforcement

There are two ways of training any animal – positive and negative reinforcement. Despite its name, negative reinforcement isn't a bad thing. Instead, it's the removal of a stimulus when the desired behaviour is exhibited. When you ride, your leg and whip aids are methods of negative reinforcement because the pressure they apply is taken away when your horse moves forwards.

Negative reinforcement can be broken down into two different types. Firstly there's escape, which is when you use a whip and he moves forward to escape it. The other type of negative reinforcement is avoidance, which is when you use a subtle cue, such as your leg aid, and back it up with your whip if you don't get a response. Initially this is escaping because you're using the whip, but after a while your horse will learn to move forward from the more subtle leg aid, avoiding the back-up cue from the whip. Avoidance training is what makes your horse pay attention because he has to spot the subtle cue that comes before the bigger one, and if he can do that then he can avoid it instead of having to escape from it, which uses up more energy.



*If he tries to come into your space...*



*...ask him to step back*



### Stay focused

The groundwork technique I use to teach horses to lead politely is another type of avoidance training. By staying focused and watching you for specific cues, he's able to avoid pressure on his leadrope.

While he's standing in his sweet spot, your horse should be cued into your body language, waiting for a signal that you're about to ask him to do something. If you watch horses in a herd, they'll walk or trot along in a line, nose to tail and if one stops, they'll all stop, even if the one at the back can't see the one at the front, because they're so aware of each other. So, if his mind starts to wander then it's your job to get his focus back.

#### TOP TIP

This technique can be very helpful if your horse has a tendency to be spooky. By teaching him to stay focused on you, he'll be less likely to notice scary things and should, therefore, be less likely to spook.

### How to do it...

If you can see that your horse is starting to become distracted, walk away in the opposite direction to where he's facing. Move slowly and deliberately to give him plenty of opportunity to pick up on your cue, but don't put pressure on the rope. Instead, keep it slack and, if he doesn't notice your cue to move, he'll be the one causing it to tighten and pull on his halter and he should move forward to relieve the pressure. He can walk wherever he feels comfortable, either at your shoulder or slightly behind, as long as he stays out of your space and matches your speed. Every time his focus starts to drift off you, though, ask him to do something. Turning and walking away is only a subtle command, but it means that he

has to keep paying attention to you to avoid getting pulled with the leadrope. Once he starts paying attention, you can move at a more normal speed.

If he's overtaking when you lead him, it's because he's anticipating where you're going and not paying attention. He's taken control of the situation. To get his focus back, turn around and go the opposite way. If he wants to walk that's okay, but he has to walk in the direction that you tell him. Every time he goes past you, change direction and eventually he'll start to focus in on you and move when you move. He'll wait for you to make the decisions because it's easier and more comfortable for him than getting pulled with the rope.

If his attention starts to shift from you...



...turn and walk away in the opposite direction...



...and he'll have to focus again



### Coming to a halt

It's important that your horse learns to stop when you do, too. Just like before, he needs to do this outside your personal bubble, as he would with another horse – you don't see a herd of horses crashing into each other like bumper cars.

#### How to do it...

If you stop with some slack in the rope and he fails to halt, too, he'll pull himself up when he reaches the end of the rope. Repeat that enough times and he'll soon learn to stop when you stop. Think of it as him being tied to a post.

If he stops inside your space, send him backwards to where you originally wanted him to stand, first using your halter aid and then backing it up with the flag or leadrope if you need to, because he can't go backwards without stopping first. The trick to horse training is not to ask your horse to do the thing you want him to do. Instead, you need to ask him to do something else that he can't do without also doing what you want.

Keep slack in the leadrope when you stop



Ask him to step over using pressure on his halter...



...and back it up with your hands if he doesn't respond



Asking your horse to step out of your space shows him that you're the dominant one

### Hands off

If you need to move your horse over and he ignores pressure on his halter, don't push him. He's much stronger than you, so he won't move unless he wants to. Horses have a natural instinct to push into things, which goes back to how the foal leans against his mother, so if you try to push him away he'll probably just push back. Instead push the air in the direction of his face. Don't make contact, but he should move away from your hands. Again, this act of making him step away from you asserts your dominance.

When he has stepped away, it's important to show him that your hands aren't going to hurt him, or you might encourage him to become headshy. Use your hands to rub on him – if he's happy to allow you to then rub his face, or if not then on his withers.

### Consistency is key

Never ask your horse for something without wanting it. Be committed and keep asking until you get the response that you want – you don't take the pressure of your leg aid off until your horse speeds up, so it should be no different when you're working with him on the ground because this is just another type of aid. You need to be consistent – horses don't stop learning, so any time you let him stop or change direction without a cue from you, you're condoning that behaviour in any future circumstance. ■



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